

Women in Resistance: Post-Lesbianism as an Anti-Humanist Existentialism

Ariane Queneau

Among the feminism of the twentieth century, the practice of political lesbianism has enjoyed a rich theoretical and applied history. Political lesbianism, which advocates women's pursuit of intimacy exclusively with other women as a positive alternative to heterosexuality, emerged from the analysis of heterosexuality as a political regime that founds, or at least sustains, the subjugation of women. The reception and manifestation of political lesbianism has varied, with the largest rift (resulting from a larger theoretical rift) being between Anglophone (primarily American) 'radical feminists' and French 'materialist feminists'. As Monique Wittig points out in her essay "One is Not Born a Woman," American lesbian feminism, which has offered lesbian separatism in addition to the elective lesbianism, has been characterized by a biologicistic mode of thought that reinforces the imaginary formation of sex/gender by naturalizing the division of man and woman in their assumption that the category of sex has always and will always exist,¹ and that necessarily, lesbians have always existed, as seen in Adrienne Rich's infamous "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence."² Anglophone radical feminism in general, among the ranks of which are these lesbian feminists, have advocated gender abolition on the basis that the gender system is the manifestation of patriarchy, but have maintained women as a natural group, citing "female biology" (XX chromosomes, vagina, uterus, etc.) as the foundation of patriarchal oppression. The central claim, perhaps most comprehensively found in *The Dialectic of Sex* by Shulamith Firestone, is that "sex class sprang directly from a biological reality: men and women were created different, and not equally privileged" and thusly, "[t]he biological family [the foundation of patriarchal society] is an inherently unequal power distribution." In this analysis, women are reduced to their biological capacity to reproduce and this difference in reproductive function between men and women is considered "the first division of labor."³ The popularity of this reactionary view in Anglophone

¹Monique Wittig, "One is Not Born a Woman", in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 10

²Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader*, ed. Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 136

³Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), 8

feminism has led to further misguided analysis, such as that all PIV (penis-in-vagina) sex is rape, that males are inferior and/or inherently violent, and that matriarchy is preferable to patriarchy.

Wittig's materialist feminism opposes these ideas and notes that "the...origin of oppression is in fact only the *mark* imposed by the oppressor: the "myth of woman," plus' its material effects and manifestations in the appropriated consciousness and bodies of women,"⁴ effectively exposing the concept of a natural sexual division as a confusion of cause and effect. The materialist feminist approach to gender abolition proposes that radical lesbianism is necessary and proper as the strategy of women's liberation, following from the idea that the gender binary only exists as a specific social relation (heterosexuality) and, that by refusing heterosexuality and becoming a lesbian, one goes "beyond the categories of sex." Wittig's famous claim is that lesbians are not women, but a designated subject who escapes their class. Radical lesbianism is the horizon of subjectivity in the abandonment of the myth of woman. However, there is a contradiction within Wittig's argument; by destroying "woman" (and the category in sex in general) without destroying lesbianism, Wittig effectively retains the female subject, simply displaced from what is considered her formative position. It registers as a failure to take her own thought to its logical conclusion, that lesbianism, being a remnant Other to heterosexuality, must go as well. Rather than lesbians as women who have escaped womanhood, they ought to be seen as women *resisting* womanhood, but of course, resistance does not equal revolution and radical lesbianism represents neither autonomy from nor destruction of gender. The question we must pose, then, is "how do we logically take a gender abolitionist approach to radical lesbianism?"

French materialist feminism draws heavily from the work of Simone de Beauvoir, who posits men and women as dialectically opposed, man being the One universal subject and woman the Other particular/"marked" object (of masculinist discourse and sexual desire). As a result of Wittig's following of Beauvoir, her thought has a characteristically Sartrean existentialist slant. In the question of liberation, Wittig (by way of Beauvoir) sees the human subject as the locus of agency, an explanation of why she considers women to be capable of their own autonomy through lesbianism, but still in her loyalty to Marxism, recognizes "the mark of gender", the imposition/construction of gender identity, as the ground of oppression. The mark of gender

⁴Monique Wittig, "One is Not Born a Woman," in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 10-11

objectifies (Othered) the now-female subject, disallowing her from the universality enjoyed by men and *alienating* her. As MacKinnon says, from the point of the view of the object, objectification is alienation: "Reification is not just an illusion to the reified; it is also their reality."⁵ If the straight woman only conceives her self as other, only in relation to male sexuality, the lesbian reclaims her place as transcendent and universal subject. Whereas the woman is dehumanized by heterosexuality, the lesbian *rehumanizes* herself by her own agency.

This line of thought, very much in the realm of Sartre's humanist existentialism, assumes both the intrinsic (and thus presocial) property of human freedom and the neutrality of language. While proposing the solution to the perceived universality of man in language is taking both the universal (masculine) and particular (feminine) view, what Wittig fails to realize is that because the gendered nature of grammar is an effect of language being the domain of the universal masculine subject. That matrix of power is effectively impenetrable because the female subject is not only repressed through functions of language, "women" being negated by the political and ideological formation of "Woman", but also is produced through functions of language. The subject is only a subject insofar as she is made to be one, the existentialist subject is only morally responsible insofar as they are held to an imposed notion of responsibility. Radical lesbianism could not be liberatory because it can never make an escape from the heterosexual matrix of power, the law, by recourse to a falsely transcendent subject before the law or to the utopian vision of inclusion into universality after the law, as these 'outsides' are themselves constituted by the discourses of heterosexuality. The integrity of heterosexuality is indeed maintained through the production and prohibition of these outsides. Radical lesbianism may not be a viable practice of freedom from heterosexuality, but does at least establish the point of departure of a critique and certainly a pragmatic means of survival and better living for women. Radical lesbianism as a practice of resistance illustrates that "to operate within the matrix of power is not the same as to replicate uncritically relations of domination" and that it is possible to repeat the law for "not its consolidation, but its displacement."⁶ In order to push further towards the deconstruction of the category of sex, we must rid radical lesbianism of the female subject, and effectively, the lesbian subject.

⁵Catharine MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," *Signs* 7, no.3 (1982): 542

⁶Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 30

Radical lesbianism could be seen as a sexual utopianism that follows from Wittig's idealism in regard to the plasticity of language and the construction of the natural body. While she recognizes the myth of "woman" as a discourse that produces a political and economic reality for "women," she ignores that such discourse itself produces reality (to which there is no outside) rather than obscures it as a veil that conceals the truth of the pre-discursive subject. By splitting "levels of reality" ("the conceptual reality and the material reality of oppression, which are both social realities") through subjective, cognitive practice, Wittig arrives at the conclusion that through constituting oneself as a subject, i.e. taking up lesbianism, one denies the "conceptual reality" (the myth of "woman" and the naturalness of heterosexuality, to be understood as an essentially empty 'base' in Marxist terms) and thus lives to destroy or at least lives in stark opposition to the "material reality" (the 'superstructure' that is the subjugation of women (read: heterosexual women)). She says herself that the moment in which women gain a class consciousness, an awareness of themselves as objects of oppression and appropriation, is the moment where a woman truly becomes a cognitive subject who can assume the universal point of view and, in Sartrean fashion, commit to a life that everyone should practice. Whereas the sexuality of the woman is "an individual and subjective expression, but social institution of violence," lesbian sexuality is the expression of the self-constituted subject, but radical lesbianism ensures that this expression is offered as universal.⁷ The class of radical lesbians exist as a utopian figure, an intentional community that makes claim to a "special kind of absolute truth, reason, and justice...conditioned by [her] subjective understanding, [her] conditions of existence, the measure of [her] knowledge and [her] intellectual training, [to which] there is no other ending possible in this conflict of absolute truths than that they shall be mutually exclusive of one another."⁸

The error of understanding power (heterosexual power, in this case) as a matter of will, of submission by lack of consciousness or refusal by withdrawing to a conceptual 'outside' (such as lesbianism), lies in Sartrean existentialism's dualism of agent and action. Because Wittig sees womanhood as performative only insofar as the participation in the heterosexual contract, she yields to Nietzsche's 'psychology of error', in which one creates imaginary causes and the illusion

⁷Monique Wittig, "One is Not Born a Woman," in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 16

⁸Frederick Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, trans. Edward Aveling (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1908), 74

of free will, which is to say, will as cause. As "no one is accountable for existing at all, or for being constituted as he is, or for living in the circumstances and surroundings in which he lives,"⁹ there is no intrinsically free subject being held hostage behind one's gender identity (or expression). Radical lesbianism, in supporting the doctrine of will, cannot be the practice of freedom as it falls into the trap of the regulatory practices which assume that one can exist apart from the whole and thus can and should be held accountable for acts. I wouldn't however retire the doctrine of existentialism entirely, abandoning the dictum of "existence precedes essence" or the notion of freedom emerging from anguish. Sartrean existentialism, with its Cartesian dualism and quasi-Kantian ethics of universality, is insufficiently critical for a feminist politics conscious of the limits of identification. The legacy of Nietzsche (most clearly present in the work of Foucault and Deleuze), as well as Max Stirner, gives ground for a radically different existentialism that can more realistically be conjoined with feminism and materialism. For a valuable critique of Wittig's radical lesbianism, one must evaluate whether the existentialist project of self-determination ought to be in the name of an "I" (who, for Wittig, is the universal masculine subject) or against that "I" itself. Whereas the Sartrean would say "existentialism is a humanism," the Nietzschean may say "existentialism is an anti-humanism."

The foundation of an anti-humanist critique that opens up the possibility of an autonomous individual (a nuanced concept I shall explore) can be found in this passage from Stirner's *The Ego and His Own*:

"You call me the unhuman," it might say to him, "and so I really am — for you; but I am so only because you bring me into opposition to the human, and I could despise myself only so long as I let myself be hypnotized into this opposition. I was contemptible because I sought my 'better self' outside me; I was the unhuman because I dreamed of the 'human'; I resembled the pious who hunger for their 'true self' and always remain 'poor sinners'; I thought of myself only in comparison to another; enough, I was not all in all, was not — unique.["*einzig*"] But now I cease to appear to myself as the unhuman, cease to measure myself and let myself be measured by man, cease to recognize anything above me: consequently — adieu, humane critic! I only have been the unhuman, am it now no longer, but am the unique, yes, to your loathing, the egoistic; yet not the egoistic as it lets itself be measured by the human, humane, and unselfish, but the egoistic as the — unique."¹⁰

⁹Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 65

¹⁰Max Stirner, *The Ego and His Own*, trans. Steven T. Byington (New York: Benj. R. Tucker, 1907), 87

Where the humanist existentialist, or even the radical lesbian, seeks their better self outside of themselves, dreaming of the transcendent human subject, Stirner's 'egoist', similar to Nietzsche's 'sovereign individual', only lives by their own standards of value. This form of the existentialist's philosophy as a way of life is characterized by *the transvaluation of values*, that is, the evaluation (deconstruction, even) of the given values and discourses that constitute society by new standards. For Nietzsche, it is the rejection of morality and the adoption of a personal perspective for which one takes full personal responsibility. Nietzsche proposes that freedom of the will is not a property intrinsic to human consciousness, nor is it one that is often practiced by humans. Transposing the critique of morality to sexuality, sexuality is a system of social organization, creating a concept of responsibility as well as punishment and guilt, and rendering the human being to be uniform, regular, and predictable. This law produces both heterosexuality as a good and homosexuality as an evil, but of course, both conceptions are effects, creations of sexuality. The 'sexuality of custom' acts as a means that bears an end, an autonomous individual beyond sexuality. Rather than having the right to make promises as Nietzsche's supra-moral "sovereign individual," this supra-sexual being could be said to have the right to express *desire*. The radical lesbian confines herself as a woman directing her desire exclusively towards women as a means of practicing an 'oppositional' sexuality; however, this Nietzschean 'post-lesbian' moves beyond lesbian asceticism and possesses her own autonomous and enduring will through the acquisition of her own standard of value, independent of outside moral judgments about sexual practice. Radical lesbianism is a kind of slave morality, a "morality of utility" rooted in resentment against the "straight mind" and conceiving of the heterosexual as the image of evil. The post-lesbian rejects resentment and affirms life; she decides alone where her desire is directed, and she alone is responsible. It's easy to see how this conception of the post-lesbian could fall into a crass and individualistic idealism, just the same one that Nietzsche criticizes. One cannot truly *be* post-lesbian, as post-lesbianism is an attitude, the practice of autonomy to its deepest internalization. Stable achievement of such a rare freedom is not even a plausible ideal for one to strive towards. Instead, post-lesbianism could be used as a framework of critique, a lesbianism critical of itself.

In keeping with a materialist politics, Stirner's concept of 'ownness' [Eigenheit] may shed some light on just how the post-lesbian paradigm operates. In the second part of *The Ego and His Own*, Stirner introduces ownness as contrasting to freedom, which "only lives in the realm of

dreams." For him, freedom is a Christian ideal, which brings about self-denial, through the negation of life as it is. As such, if one is free from everything, they have nothing, while if I am my *own*, I can make use of whatever hand I am dealt:

One can get *rid* of a great many things, one yet does not get rid of all; one becomes free from much, not from everything. Inwardly one may be free in spite of the condition of slavery, although, too, it is again only from all sorts of things, not from everything; but from the whip, the domineering temper, of the master, one does not as slave become *free*. "Freedom lives only in the realm of dreams!" Ownness, on the contrary, is my whole being and existence, it is I myself. I am free from what I am *rid* of, owner of what I have in my *power* or what I *control*. *My own* I am at all times and under all circumstances, if I know how to have myself and do not throw myself away on others. To be free is something that I cannot truly *will*, because I cannot make it, cannot create it: I can only wish it and — aspire toward it, for it remains an ideal, a spook. The fetters of reality cut the sharpest welts in my flesh every moment. But *my own* I remain. Given up as serf to a master, I think only of myself and my advantage; his blows strike me indeed, I am not *free* from them; but I endure them only for *my benefit*, perhaps in order to deceive him and make him secure by the semblance of patience, or, again, not to draw worse upon myself by contumacy.[...]Why will you not take courage now to really make *yourselves* the central point and the main thing altogether? Why grasp in the air at freedom, your dream? Are you your dream? Do not begin by inquiring of your dreams, your notions, your thoughts, for that is all "hollow theory." Ask yourselves and ask after yourselves — that is *practical*, and you know you want very much to be "practical." [...] "What am I?" each of you asks himself. An abyss of lawless and unregulated impulses, desires, wishes, passions, a chaos without light or guiding star! How am I to obtain a correct answer, if, without regard to God's commandments or to the duties which morality prescribes, without regard to the voice of reason, which in the course of history, after bitter experiences, has exalted the best and most reasonable thing into law, I simply appeal to myself?¹¹

In being a critical paradigm *within* the constitutive matrix of power rather proclaiming itself as outside of or transcendent from the discourses which produce subjectivity, post-lesbianism recognizes, for example, the materiality of womanhood in the sense that one may claim womanhood by the political or ideological circumstance for which they are not responsible. However, it seeks to expose gender identity as a fabrication which can neither be true nor false, a fantasy inscribed and enacted on the surface of the body.¹² The genealogical strategy of post-lesbianism is "not to discover the roots of our identity, but commit...to its dissipation."¹³ The

¹¹Max Stirner, *The Ego and His Own*, trans. Steven T. Byington (New York; Benj. R. Tucker, 1907), 94-96

¹²Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 136

¹³Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 95

rejection of a true and stable gender identity is the nihilist gesture that characterizes this immanent critique. I do not mean, of course, that taking up an agender identity or something similar is truly emancipatory in any sense, but that the frontier of womanhood (and thus, lesbianism) ought to be abandoned as the mask of a 'revolutionary class.' As such an attitude is committed to the displacement of the discourses of gender and sexuality, addressing identity as simulacrum and a mask in itself, the post-lesbian does not enjoy the masquerade of gender, but pushes it to its limit. The post-lesbian strategy is, as Foucault says, "no longer the identification with the solid identities of our past, but our "unrealization" through the excessive choice of identities."¹⁴ Following the approach of Stirnerite 'ownness', one makes use of the restraints of gender through stylistic gestures that displace rather than consolidate the law of the heterosexual matrix. A continuous practice of internal and external awareness forms the basis of this willing of freedom in which agency only comes from the possibility of remaining within power relations. To return to the existentialist question, if no one is responsible for how they are constituted, the seizure of responsibility must be in the terms of having always already been constituted: "To task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat, or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, *to displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself."¹⁵ One only has as much freedom as they are willing to take, and this willing of freedom is a painful and endless struggle that one handles alone. Radical lesbianism is an essentially *reactive* position, the formation of a political coalition that limits the body's cultural possibilities and agency; meanwhile, the post-lesbian affirms all existence (especially the tragedy of women's subjugation) and answers to no one.

Where then do we find the horizon of post-lesbianism? What is it really? Post-lesbianism is an ethics of immanence, critiquing the alleged refuge of radical lesbianism and gesturing further towards the undoing of heterosexual gender relations. The humanist existentialism of radical lesbianism is replaced by the anti-humanist existentialism of post-lesbianism. Agency and freedom of the will cannot be found in the articulation of a universal subject that claims a point of view outside of identities produced by heterosexuality, but rather in the constant dislocation of the universality of gender through strategies of redeployment and reconceptualization of power that are enabled by the heterosexual production of identity. As a feminist politics of immanent

¹⁴See note 13 above.

¹⁵Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 148

critique and the transvaluation of values, post-lesbianism is, in effect, a radical perspectivism, in contrast to the unwitting universalism of radical lesbianism. When one offers any foundationalist account of gender or sexual identity, they enact a totalizing gesture of imposing a normative and particular directive for being. As we criticize the biological reductionism of radical feminism, we must also realize any alternative discourse of truth is *ultimately* unfounded. One should reject both dogmatic essentialism that proposes ultimate and pre-discursive existence of the self and the absoluteness of cause as well as passive nihilism that denies any form of conventional agency and believes that actions have no ethical consequences. It could be said that the categories of identity matter insofar as they have material effect and meaning that is not beyond their own constitution and arises from a history all its own, but the opening up of possibilities through the undoing of identity lays bare this history and the contingency of these categories (and thus, their material effects). This being said, I do not believe at all, for example, that 'lesbian' ought to be an identity open to *any* interpretation or configuration other than what it can be reduced to: someone aligned with womanhood who exclusively directs sexual alliance or relation to other people aligned with womanhood. Because identities are produced through regulatory practices and are material formations of power, one should make their own conscious judgments about their own subjectivity and displace the truth that produces their reality in favor of their own. This proliferation of possibilities cannot be considered something inherently positive ('freedom' is not simply good for its own sake) and although perspective cannot be eliminated, not all perspectives are equally valid. It should be said that perspectives, i.e. interpretations, emerge from values, which are the foundational target of our assessment of all things in existence. The post-lesbian attitude's commitment to unraveling sexuality takes up the 'historical sense' of Nietzschean genealogy:

The historical sense gives rise to three uses that oppose and correspond to the three Platonic modalities of history. The first is parodic, directed against reality, and opposes the theme of history as reminiscence or recognition; the second is dissociative, directed against identity, and opposes history given as continuity or representative of a tradition; the third is sacrificial, directed against truth, and opposes history as knowledge. They imply a use of history that severs its connection to memory, its metaphysical and anthropological model, and constructs a counter-memory—a transformation of history into a totally different form of time.¹⁶

¹⁶Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 93

In her affirmation of life and critical investigation of her own sex/gender/desire, the post-lesbian emerges as, in simple terms, a lesbian bent on her own destruction.

The critical task of establishing a lesbian-feminist politics that offers a materialist account of agency is the disestablishment of the previous lesbian-feminisms' universalizing constructions of identity and utopian dreams of escaping the heterosexual matrix of power. My own conviction as a lesbian, particularly an androgynous black agender trans lesbian, is that to dislocate heterosexual power and disable it as an apparatus of violence against my sisters, one must wage a ruthless critique of all culturally constructed identity, even lesbianism. The fact of the matter is that radical lesbianism cannot save us from power, nor grant us with an agency beyond the dominating relations of sexuality/gender. As the mechanisms of gendered violence are stabilized through the furnishing the body with identity, personhood, rooted in the constructs of sex, gender, and sexuality, we must take the risk of losing identity, rejecting it even, through strategies of discontinuity and incoherence. If those who fail to perform "their" gender right are not free from punishment, no one is, nor can be without the destruction of the law. Having been through the disillusionment and rage of adopting radical lesbianism, which hardly feels like any more free of a position than, say, a bisexual non-binary identity, post-lesbianism emerges from the realization that "visibility is a trap" and the panoptic nature of gender identity retires the need to exercise punitive power against the gendered subject, who compulsively disciplines themselves in reaction to gender norms. To seek out the expansion or strengthening of channels of intelligibility is to play directly into the trap of regulatory practices. To suggest lesbian or non-binary identity as necessarily liberatory assumes that any acceptance of a culturally constructed identity can save one from the cultural construction of identity itself. Post-lesbianism is a nomadism that cultivates the self as the immanent convergence of flows and becomings. The post-lesbian attitude is the direction towards a becoming-imperceptible that displaces the self from the law completely, as the strategy of upholding the law necessitates a transcendent conception of the self. In her struggle against the "I", the post-lesbian strives towards "the point of fusion between the self and his/her habitat, the cosmos as a whole...the point of evanescence of the self and its replacement by a living nexus of multiple inter-connections that empower not the self, but the collective, not identity, but affirmative subjectivity, not consciousness, but

affirmative inter-connections."¹⁷ When the radical lesbian delegates her selfhood not to the transcendence of a "freer" sexuality, i.e. lesbianism, but to the radical immanence of desire, she enacts the post-lesbian gesture that retreats from gendered intelligibility and the humanist-existentialist psychology of error.

¹⁷Rosi Braidotti, "The Ethics of Becoming Imperceptible," in *Deleuze and Philosophy*, ed. Constantin Boundas (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 157

Bibliography

Braidotti, Rosi. "The Ethics of Becoming Imperceptible." In *Deleuze and Philosophy*, edited by Constantin Boundas. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Engels, Frederick. *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, trans. Edward Aveling. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1908.

Firestone, Shulamith. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. New York: Bantam Books, 1971.

Foucault, Michel. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." In *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow, 76-100. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.

MacKinnon, Catharine. "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory." *Signs* 7, no.3 (1982): 515-544.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Anti-Christ*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin Books, 1990.

Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." In *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader*, edited by Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott, 130-141. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

Wittig, Monique. "One is Not Born a Woman." In *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, 9-20. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.

